



DID YOU WONDER WHO FIRED THE GUN?
DIR. TRAVIS WILKERSON
(2017 True/False Film Fest)

Synopsis

"In 1946, my great-grandfather murdered a black man named Bill Spann and got away with it." So begins Travis Wilkerson's critically acclaimed documentary, DID YOU WONDER WHO FIRED THE GUN?, which takes us on a journey through the American South to uncover the truth behind a horrific incident and the societal mores that allowed it to happen. Acting as narrator and guide, Wilkerson spins a strange, frightening tale, incorporating scenes from TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, the music of Janelle Monáe and Phil Ochs, and the story of Rosa Parks' investigation into the Recy Taylor case, as well as his own family history, for a gripping investigation into our collective past and its echoes into the present day.¹

What Did I Just See?

"As Wilkerson expands the scope of his inquiry, he comes into terrifying contact with the ongoing legacy of white supremacy. With his searing, impassioned monologue (which, at the

¹The synopsis for [Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?](#) was retrieved from Grasshopper Film. The above picture is courtesy of Grasshopper Film.

time of the movie's première, Wilkerson delivered live onstage while the movie was playing), Wilkerson creates, alongside a work of intimate and historical revelation, a passionate work of mourning and rage, of challenge to privilege and responsibility, of the unredressed injustices perpetuated by enforced silence."²

—Richard Brody (2018), *What's New in Streaming: "Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?," A Documentary About Unredressed Injustice* | The New Yorker

"In '[The Fire Next Time](#),' James Baldwin wrote that "to accept one's past — one's history — is not the same thing as drowning in it." He knew that the superstitious fear of being swallowed up, the dread of giving up a fantasy of innocence, is precisely what keeps so many white Americans from confronting the uglier aspects of the nation's legacy.

Travis Wilkerson, a documentary filmmaker whose roots are in small-town Alabama, attempts just such a reckoning in "*Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?*" The movie, a scorching and rigorous essay on memory and accountability, is neither a profession of guilt nor a performance of virtue. Though his inquiry is intensely, at times painfully personal, Mr. Wilkerson is above all concerned with unpacking the mechanisms of racial domination. The procedure is akin to performing surgery on a half-conscious subject, or digging up a buried landmine that has lost little of its explosive power."³

—A.O. Scott. (2018), *Review: 'Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?' Reckons With White Supremacy* | The New York Times

MODES OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

When thinking critically about any type of media, we often start by trying to contextualize what we're about to or just engaged with by putting it into a category, a classification of some sorts that comes with a set of rules for how it was created, and therefore, how we can anticipate experiencing it. In Bill Nichols' book, *Introduction to Documentary*, he discusses six modes of documentary film: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative. Sometimes we come across a film that seems to weave its way through multiple modes. *Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?* seems to have at least one foot planted firmly in the performative mode, as defined below.

According to an article from *MasterClass*, performative documentary films are those that "focus on the filmmakers' involvement with their subject, using their personal experience or relationship with the subject as a jumping-off point for exploring larger, subjective truths about politics, history, or groups of people." The article goes on to list a set of characteristics performative documentaries generally possess, including it being a more personal form of

²Brody, R. (2018). ["Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?," A Documentary About Unredressed Injustice](#). The New Yorker

³Scott, A.O. (2018). [Review: 'Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?' Reckons With White Supremacy](#), The New York Times

nonfiction filmmaking, "often emphasizing the filmmaker's involvement, as they appear as the centerpiece of the film, driving the action, speaking with subjects, and analyzing information."⁴

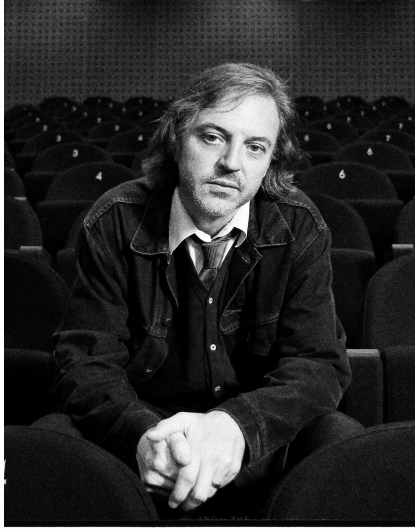
For more information on the modes of documentary film, we suggest checking out the below resource from No Film School, which in addition to offering definitions, also provides film clips / trailers to illustrate their characteristics.

[Nichols' 6 Modes of Documentary Might Expand Your Storytelling Strategies](#) (2015) | Oakley Anderson-Moore, No Film School

POST-FILM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Using two sentences or less, describe what you think this film is about. Is there a central theme or message the filmmaker is trying to communicate to the audience? What is it and how do you know?
- Are there certain groups of people predominantly shown in the film? What types or groups of people are noticeably missing (not represented)? Why does this matter? How does this choice by the filmmaker (either consciously or subconsciously) affect the film's tone and message?
- Let's talk about narration! Wilkerson's narration in this film was distinctive, especially in terms of tone and pacing. Do you feel that the words he spoke - and in particular how he spoke them - enhanced the story and images on screen, making them more impactful? If so, in what way?
- In his film, Wilkerson states, "*My great grandfather murdered that man Bill Spann. He shot him in cold blood and got away with it. I filmed the graveyard using an expensive camera. I was **paid** to do it. Two families, both lived in Alabama one white, one black. One is the family of the murderer; one is the family of the murdered. One is buried in an unmarked grave, and one is filming it. That's a pretty precise expression of racism.*" In what other ways did you see similar expressions of racism in the film? Can you think of any present day examples?
- Throughout the film, the filmmaker breaks into recurring scenes with singer/activist Janelle Monae's "*Hell You Talmbout*" playing, while displaying some of the names of unarmed African Americans who were killed without justice. Why do you think the filmmaker repeated this sequence? Are there connections between the stories and names displayed and the story within the film itself? If so, what are they?

⁴[Film 101: Understanding Performative Documentary Mode](#). (2020), MasterClass.



TRAVIS WILKERSON: IN HIS OWN WORDS

A hallmark of the True/False experience is watching a film and having the immediate gratification of asking questions / getting answers from the filmmaker(s). While the below resources aren't IRL, they nonetheless can provide students with insight into Wilkerson's filmmaking process, sources of inspiration, and how those things and more result in what we see on screen during *DID YOU WONDER WHO FIRED THE GUN?* and beyond.

VIDEO: [‘Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?’ Q&A | Travis Wilkerson](#) | New York Film Festival | Film at Lincoln Center

ARTICLE: [“False Optimism is as Destructive as Pessimism” Travis Wilkerson on His Essay Film About Racism, Family Legacy and the American South, *Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?*](#) | Daniel Christian for Filmmaker Magazine

AUDIO: [True/False Conversations—Wilkerson’s ‘Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?’ Explores Family Secret](#) | with Michaela Tucker & Catherine Wheeler for KBIA

Also, be sure to check out our interview with Wilkerson, available to view during the Hindsight screening window for *Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?* (March 7-14th)!

TRAVIS WILKERSON | FILMOGRAPHY

Nuclear Family (In progress)

KRCW's The Document—Underground (2019)

Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun? (2017)

Machine Gun or Typewriter? (2015)

Los Angeles Red Squad (2013)

Fragments of Dissolution (2012)

Distinguished Flying Cross (2011)

Who Killed Cock Robin? (2005)

An Injury to One (2002)

Accelerated Under-Development: In the Idiom of Santiago Alvarez (1999)

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: BEYOND THE MUSIC

Wilkerson incorporated several music selections throughout his film. One song in particular that served as both the inspiration behind the film's overarching questions and title, was "*William Moore*" by Phil Ochs.

RESEARCH

- Before analyzing the lyrics to Ochs song, it's important for students to have an understanding of who William Lewis Moore was, beyond what was mentioned in the film. Either using the links below, or asking students to conduct their own research, talk as a class about who William Moore was, and why they think Wilkerson chose to include Moore's story in his film.

READ

- Print and hand out copies to students of the full lyrics to Phil Ochs's song "*William Moore*" (included on page 6).
- As a class, read the lyrics to *William Moore*, asking for student volunteers to read aloud each of the song's stanzas.
- While the song lyrics are being read, ask students to underline or highlight lines that stand out to them, or ones they have questions about.

DISCUSS

- After reading the lyrics aloud and listening to the song, have students engage in a lyrical analysis of what the song might have meant to them as a whole. Begin leading students to dissect specific lines in the song that stood out to them (As the teacher/instructor, be sure to have a few lines selected of your own to reference with background research for further insight).
(Ex: What do you think the songwriter means by "*What price the glory of one man*"?)
- Additional prompts / questions:
 - What words would you use to describe the tone and feeling of the song?
 - What was meant by "*There's only one southern land*"?
 - Who is Ochs referring to in the line, "*Did you know that it was you who fired the gun?*" What is the idea he is presenting here, and how does it relate to Wilkerson's film?
 - How does the story of William Moore parallel with the film *Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?* For example, can any parallels be drawn within the stanza below that references William Moore's father and Moore himself, between Wilkerson or other subjects in the film?

LISTEN

- As a class, listen to the song together ([HERE](#)). Afterwards, ask students how their experience of reading the lyrics as a class differed from hearing them performed.

"William Moore"⁵

Written by Phil Ochs

*Walkin' down an Alabama road
Rememberin' what the Bible told
Walkin' with a letter in his hand
Dreaming of another southern land
Walkin' down an Alabama road*

*And he went by the name of William Moore
Now what are you doing William Moore
Why the letter in your hand?
There's only one southern land
And he went by the name of William Moore*

*What price the glory of one man?
What price the glory of one man?
What price the hopes
What price the dreams
And what price the glory of one man?*

*Remembering what his grandfather done
Fought for the south in '61
A hundred years have passed by since then
Now Moore is fighting for the south again
Remembering what his grandfather done*

*Remembering the time in World War II
And the South Pacific Island that he knew
Remembering the young men that he killed
And the praying that the guns of hate be
stilled
Remembering the time in World War II*

*What price the glory of one man?
What price the glory of one man?
What price the hopes
What price the dreams
And what price the glory of one man?*

*And they shot him on the Alabama road
Forgot about what the Bible told
They shot him with that letter in his hand
As though he were a dog and not a man
And they shot him on the Alabama road*

*Did you say it was a shame when he died?
Did you say he was a fool because he tried?
Did you wonder who had fired the gun?
Did you know that it was you who fired the
gun?
Did you say it was a shame when he died?*

*What price the glory of one man?
What price the glory of one man?
What price the hopes
What price the dreams
And what price the glory of one man?*

⁵The above song lyrics to [William Moore by Phil Ochs](#) was retrieved from Lyric Advisor.

RESOURCE LIST FOR *DID YOU WONDER WHO FIRED THE GUN?*

FILM INFORMATION

Grasshopper Films: <http://grasshopperfilm.com/film/did-you-wonder-who-fired-the-gun/>

Travis Wilkerson Films.com: <https://www.traviswilkersonfilms.com/films>

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Anderson-Moore, O. (2015). *Nichols' 6 Modes of Documentary Might Expand Your Storytelling Strategies*. No Film School:

<https://nofilmschool.com/2015/09/nichols-6-modes-documentary-can-help-expand-your-storytelling>

Brody, R. (2018). "Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?," *A Documentary About Unredressed Injustice*. The New Yorker:

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/whats-new-in-streaming-did-you-wonder-who-fired-the-gun-a-documentary-about-unredressed-injustice>

Christian, D. (2018). "False Optimism is as Destructive as Pessimism" Travis Wilkerson on His Essay Film About Racism, Family Legacy and the American South, *Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?*. Filmmaker Magazine:

<https://filmmakermagazine.com/105964-false-optimism-is-as-destructive-as-pessimism-travis-wilkerson-on-his-essay-film-about-racism-family-legacy-and-the-american-south-did-you-wonder-who-fired-the-gun/#.YDiEh-IKjEY>

Film at Lincoln Center. (2018) 'Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?' Q&A | Travis Wilkerson New York Film Festival: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzPYKJ2aZps>

Lyric Advisor. *William Moore* by Phil Ochs.

https://www.streetdirectory.com/lyricadvisor/song/eeaplu/william_moore/

MasterClass. (2020). Film 101: Understanding Performative Documentary Mode.

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/understanding-performative-documentary-mode#what-is-performative-documentary>

The Orchid Express. (2014). *William Moore*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHPLq6FNTa0>

Scott, A.O. (2018). *Review: 'Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?' Reckons With White Supremacy*, The New York Times:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/27/movies/did-you-wonder-who-fired-the-gun-review.html>

Tucker, M. & Wheeler, C. (2017). True/False Conversations—Wilkerson’s ‘Did You Wonder Who Fired The Gun?’ Explores Family Secret. KBIA:
<https://www.kbia.org/post/truefalse-conversations-wilkerson-s-did-you-wonder-who-fired-gun-explores-family-secret#stream/0>